

Against government grain, trustee's office goes green with high design

BY ED ARNOLD

Drab colors, cramped spaces and dark offices are the images that come to mind when thinking about a government office building.

Shelby County Support Services

In-house construction, maintenance and other services for Shelby County Administrator: Tom Moss

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Transforming a government structure to a more inviting and environmentally friendly place is often low on the list of priorities. But the \$5.1 million renovation of the building at 157 Poplar Ave. that houses the Shelby County Trustee's offices may just surprise residents the next time they need to pay the tax-man.

"It's just a whole different atmosphere in our new building," says Debra Gates, chief administrative officer for the Shelby County Trustee.

The nearly 62,000-square-foot building had fallen into disrepair over the last 40 years and was slated to be demolished to make way for a parking deck.

"We had a building sitting there for several years trying to decide what to do with itself," says Tom Moss, administrator of Shelby County Support Services.

A combination of the Trustee's need to move from its former location at 160 Poplar Ave. and the District Attorney, whose offices are also at 157 Poplar Ave., needing additional space led to the decision to save the building.

It was a big job. Updating the elevators, adding a new emergency generator and installing a more efficient sprinkler



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Debra Gates with the Shelby County Trustee and Jenna Thompson with University of Memphis School of Architecture teamed up to renovate the trustee's office.

system cost more than \$1 million.

All the windows were replaced with double-paned glass, costing \$375,000. The new windows help improve energy costs by giving the offices more natural light while improving insulation.

The renovation included low VOC paints, green label-plus certified carpeting which contains recycled material and an energy-efficient HVAC system.

During the planning phase of the renovation, Gates saw an opportunity that

few employees ever get.

"We knew that if we got in on the front end of the renovation and if support services was willing to work with us, which they were, we could have an influence on the design of our space," Gates says.

Gates reached out to the University of Memphis' School of Architecture and began a partnership with adjunct professor of interior design, Jenna Thompson. Thompson used the op-

portunity to give her students some real-world experience and to implement some innovative ideas. Among them: the repurposing of the building's most unique characteristic.

When the building was constructed in the early 1960s, the exterior was covered in wire-frame shading panels called brise-soleil. Though the brise-soleil gave the building a distinctive (if jail-like) look, its effectiveness as a way to keep the building cool was suspect.

Thompson and her students found several ways to reuse the aluminum rather than sending it to the scrap heap.

The brise-soleil was transformed into waiting room partitions and artwork for the offices. The Memphis Metal Museum was enlisted to use part of the material as the basis for tables in the new conference room.

"It's very interesting to see how many of those workstations are repurposed," says Moss. There was occasional tension between making the building environmentally friendly while adhering to the budget Shelby County's Support Services was working under.

For example, Gates had hoped to include light fixtures that used LED lights for the trustee's offices but support services made it clear that \$60 light bulbs were not in the budget.

"Looking out for the taxpayer's dollar, can you pay a high up-front cost for something that you hope will pan out as advertised?" says Moss.

Moss does say that many of the innovative steps taken in the renovation are likely to influence future projects.

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